

# The Shock of Last Spring Suppresses Conflicts and Complexity that Surface Later: Lessons from Aurora Public Schools' COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

## Aurora Public Schools

*A suburban Colorado district's experience last spring and planning for the fall shows the benefits and limits of crisis management in dealing with COVID-19. Leaders must navigate interest group politics and intergovernmental relations, not just technical and instructional challenges.*

### Key lessons:

- Textbook crisis management—clear decisions, cross-functional responses, and unified operations—was critical for addressing real problems last spring.
- As the crisis wore on, more complicated issues surfaced: resource problems, uncertain guidance, and political conflict.

**Number of schools: 65**

**Number of students: ~40,000**

**Grades served: PreK-12**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018–2019 school year.*

**Families with income below the poverty level: 18%**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, 2014–2018.*

When Colorado Governor Jared Polis declared a state of emergency on March 10 in response to the coronavirus, the timing was fortunate for Aurora Public Schools (APS). Spring break was starting three days later. To provide a little more breathing room, the district extended its break by one week. “We thought we might be able to clear that initial incubation period, with the idea that we could all come back,” the district’s superintendent said. But by the end of that first week of break, “we all learned differently,” he added. It was clear that the state and district would not go back to normal.

In the months that followed, APS’s response to COVID-19 would reveal the promise but also some of the limits of a careful approach to crisis management. By defining its spring response as a problem of crisis management, the district was able to provide much-needed resources to

its community. But by the summer, APS's equally careful plans for reopening ran into a broader set of issues: the challenges of providing rigorous instruction rather than minimal access to learning activities, ongoing problems with internet access in the community, a lack of state-level safety guidance that hindered planning, and growing tensions over who would decide when and how the district would reopen. These problems underscore how local district responses to the virus—no matter how rational and organized—are increasingly buffeted and complicated by the environment as the pandemic drags on.

## A crisis response

By extending spring break to 10 days, APS bought some time to figure out how to provide meals to families, distribute technology, and develop a basic remote learning plan. By design, the district's remote learning plan wasn't a replacement for school. Instead, it was "a crisis response," the superintendent explained. "This [remote learning] was not school. We were not going to try and reinvent school in the span of 10 days. We were just as frank as we could be that [remote learning] . . . is about providing kids and families access to educational opportunities during a health crisis."

The district's focus on the health crisis was well placed. COVID-19 was hitting families like those in APS especially hard. Many students were newcomers to the United States, speaking over 160 different languages and coming from more than 130 countries. Seventy-eight percent are native Spanish speakers. And 68 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. Many of the district's families are headed by low-wage, essential workers. By June, the superintendent said unemployment in the district had reached 30 percent.

Reflecting on the spring, one leader said, "I very quickly fell into that [crisis] training and that response mode . . . we quickly fell into our mode of how we set up our incident response team and how we respond to crisis and tried to establish anchor points of what's known and operate from there."

Coordination was critical. "We got everybody on the phone or by video chat and said, look, here's going to be our single source of truth for information," explained the superintendent. "You're going to hear a lot of things. You're going to hear a lot of news. Here's where our source of truth is and understand that that's what we're responding to and nothing and nobody else."

It was textbook crisis management: clear executive decision-making, a cross-functional incident response team, coordinated and unified operational structures and processes, and information sharing and awareness. With a coordinated crisis management response, the district helped its families weather the storm. By the end of the summer it had delivered over 1.5 million meals to its families (APS's total enrollment is 38,000 students).

When it came to instruction, the district's stopgap response emphasized access. But leaders knew they would need to offer a more robust approach in the fall: rigorous learning, clear expectations, better structures and supports. "We know what we did in the spring, we know why we did it. That is not what we're doing in the fall," a leader noted.

## **From crisis to complexity**

As with its initial crisis response, APS turned to a textbook framework to plan for the fall, this time from the [Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center](#). Using the REMS-TA framework, the district launched recovery teams around four key issues: academics, physical and structural, business functions, and social-emotional/behavior. Each team identified challenges and lessons from the spring. They developed action plans for three scenarios: one where students would split time between in-person and remote learning, one that was fully remote, and one that was fully in-person.

By late June, APS was ready to present its recommendation for reopening to the school board. Based on health guidance and the tradeoffs presented by the three scenarios, the district recommended starting with an in-person cohort model for PreK-8 students (students attend school but stay with the same group of peers all day, each day) and a hybrid model for high school (students combine in-person and remote learning). The district also recommended providing a fully online option for any family that wanted it.

A month later, APS's school board voted to abandon the in-person/hybrid reopening plan and start school all online instead. No single event or information was responsible for the about-face. But as the short-term crisis stretched into the summer, a host of issues—resource problems, health trends, and politics—undercut the district's best-laid plans.

## **Technology needs remain unmet**

As APS planned for the fall, two of its proposed models included remote learning (the fully remote model and the hybrid model for high school). Parent surveys suggested that the 30 percent of students were likely to enroll in the fully remote option. So clearly, families needed access to technology and the internet if their children were going to engage in school.

Comcast had provided free or reduced-cost internet access to families in response to the initial crisis in the spring. But into the summer and beyond, families in Aurora were still struggling to get access. The digital divide was striking. In June, a district survey found that 15 percent of families did not have internet access. Part of the problem, district leaders explained, was simply that many families did not have credit cards to open an account. The district was looking for ways to broker internet services for families without requiring credit cards or other information. But even into the summer, “The internet is still a big issue,” a district leader said.

## **Uncertainty from the state**

Even as APS was confronting the lack of internet access, it was getting mixed signals from the state about both instruction and health and safety that impacted its planning. Colorado had helped districts by waiving seat time requirements in the spring. But in June, it had still not provided much guidance about what would happen in the fall. “The thing that is most

challenging with [the state] right now," said one district leader, is that, to plan for the fall, "I need to know: What's going to be the seat time requirement? What's going to be the graduation requirements? What are going to be . . . are we doing assessments this year? Are we going to keep up our accountability framework? Right. Because all those things inform how I set up school in August. I have no answers to any of those things."

When the governor negotiated a summertime deal to provide masks to all teachers in the state during the school year, that was helpful. But guidance from the state's health department could also upend the district's plans on short notice. For example, the same week that district leaders were planning to brief the school board on the reopening plans, the Colorado Department of Public Health released new guidance. A district leader explained,

We got brand new guidance from the Colorado Department of Public Health. And that came out on Monday [the briefing was scheduled for Thursday]. And that gave some tighter or more specific type parameters in some places that we had not necessarily anticipated around our cohort model. And so for example, very specifically, the number of adults who can flow in and out of a classroom, with the cohort of kids. And so now we're looking at our schedules to say, okay, can we adjust that, particularly at the secondary level?

## Suppressed political conflict surfaces

In the spring, APS's crisis response was well-suited to the suddenness and uncertainty of the moment. For the most part, stakeholders appeared to rally around the district and leaders were able to run the response with little pushback or conflict. Especially since the instructional response in the spring emphasized "access" rather than instruction, the district did not make demands on teachers that were outside of the labor contract. "We didn't do anything that was dramatically outside of the master agreement or that they felt was outside of the master agreement. And so [the need to negotiate with the union] never really surfaced for us."

As APS developed its plans for the fall, it included union members and union-selected teachers on its planning teams. At the time, district leaders thought that the smooth sailing from the spring would continue. "My take is if I haven't heard noise by now, given the fact that we're involved in planning out the scenarios, [the union doesn't] expect it to be a hurdle we can't overcome."

But as the national conversation around reopening heated up and cases in Colorado continued to rise, the union's members voiced concerns about returning to school. "There was definitely strong concern about their safety," said a district leader. The union presented its results to the board and, in the eyes of district leaders, was starting to "advocate more heavily for either a move to a hybrid model or a move to a fully remote model. So that is certainly a really big factor and that has the potential to heavily influence the board."

Eventually, Denver Public Schools stepped back from its reopening plan. Then, on July 24, the APS school board voted for an all-online return to school. In early August, the district told the

board that it would tie any reopening plans to public health data. But the board decided to order the district to start online regardless of the measures. Board members said they were suspicious about the trustworthiness of public health measures. One told [Chalkbeat Colorado](#), “I do feel like I’m putting [the superintendent] . . . in an unfair position. . . . But I’d rather have a frustrated superintendent than grieving parents.”

## Lessons going forward

In some ways, APS’s response to COVID-19 in the spring shows the benefits of a well-managed and planned crisis response. In the immediate aftermath of school closures, the system provided clarity. But the shock of the spring may also have suppressed conflicts and complexity. As the crisis wore on and the pandemic became the new normal, the district’s rational approach bumped into a host of new challenges. From resource problems to mixed signals to politics, external forces buffeted and constrained the district’s response. State and federal leaders in particular have complicated matters by providing unclear guidance, inadequate resources, and little political cover to local leaders.

While no one can predict what will happen in the months ahead, these complexities are unlikely to go away. As the crisis continues, local leaders must navigate not only technical and instruction challenges but longer-standing interest group politics and intergovernmental relations as well.

## I About This Project

This is the first qualitative analysis released as part of the American School District Panel (ASDP)—a national effort by CRPE, the RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, and Kitamba to surface and examine trends in the policy and practice of school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs).

This groundbreaking effort will enable district and CMO leaders an opportunity to share their perspectives and contribute to decisions about education policy and practice. Researchers will survey leaders and staff from a representative panel of school districts and CMOs across the country, as well as conduct a complementary set of qualitative studies, following these districts and CMOs over time to monitor trends.

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While this analysis draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.